



REPORT OF THE

# Study Visit to Austria

May 29 to June 5, 2022

PROJECT: “Implementing LEADER in Mestia municipality for better livelihoods in high mountainous regions of Georgia”

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## Objectives

The Terms of Reference for the ENPARD III project “Implementing LEADER in Mestia municipality for better livelihoods in high mountainous regions of Georgia” (contract No.: ENI/2018/402-469) set out the aims and actions for the participation of BAB in the project. This includes a specific focus in the scope of work for “preparational work and organization dedicated to field trips to mountain LAGs in Europe” (Annex A, activity 3).

In order to facilitate the interaction with other Local Action Groups (LAGs), and provide exposure to the implementation of LEADER as well as to specific innovative practices, members of the Mestia LAG should get the opportunity to participate in study tours to other LAGs in the EU, and to learn from a particular focus on mountainous areas. It was the intention that the Mestia LAG will learn how other territories have solved common long-lasting rural problems, how “LEADER has improved the delivery of basic services in remote communities and how the LAGs contribute to the integration and well-being of the vulnerable population” (see ToR). LEADER has been implemented in Austria since more than 25 years with a strong relevance in remote mountain regions and a long tradition of local community participative approaches. These approaches represent a widely shared body of knowledge on resource use in mountain contexts, an intensive application of diversification strategies, recognition of mountain specificities and amenities for tourism and attractive living conditions, and socio-cultural preconditions and changes observed over this long period. It was decided very early in the cycle of this project that regions of high mountain characteristics which could be regarded as models of “sustainable mountain tourism” approaches should be visited to enhance respective knowledge exchange.

As a four-year EC-funded project with co-funding from the Austrian Development Cooperation starting in December 2018 field trips originally were planned much earlier in the project life-cycle, but due to COVID-19 pandemic had to be postponed and adjusted. In contrast to the original plan of bringing a small group of the Mestia LAG twice to an Austrian LAG it was decided that due to the restrictions of the pandemic and the ensuing delay for the study visit, one intensive trip could involve a larger group of members of Mestia LAG and provide an opportunity for such an enlarged group to gain insights and draw lessons from presentations and discussions in the study visit.

## Organizational aspects to be considered

Project managers decided that the scope for the study visit could be organized within a one-week visit, including a brief introduction through a thematic workshop and a visit over several days to a mountain region that comprises all the specificities and experiences of policy application and participative approaches. Based on the special demands for such a hosting mountain region in Austria, the area of Lesachtal was selected, in particular to the long-term commitment to local engagement in a high mountain context and the particular focus on a strategy of balanced territorial development, seeking harmony of human-nature interrelations. As the municipality has been awarded the first prize of “Landscape of the Year” in 1995 by Nature Friends International, and has been approved as a founding member of the local development initiative of “Mountaineering Villages” it is emblematic for sustainable mountain tourism efforts. This regional development concept is distinct to well-known mountain regions of high-intensive tourism development and should represent a more attuned basis for learning for the Georgian guests.

Following the early approval to host the participants of LAG Mestia by the local actors in Lesachtal in 2020 the actual organization had to include a bigger visiting group (of 31 participants). After a one-day thematic workshop in Vienna, the visiting programme included the following four days of the working week: travel to the region on Tuesday (31 May 2022), local visits (31 May – 2 June 2022), a final visit to a labelling example of mountain products in a neighbouring region and return travel to Vienna (3 June 2022). Organizational details included respect of COVID-19 restrictions, which fortunately had reduced at the time of the visit, travel and accommodation arrangements, language and translation issues (German-Georgian), video and audio support at the workshop and throughout the visit in the region, as well as aspects of providing sufficient time for discussions and keeping to the programmed schedule of the agenda.



It was important that the preparation and carrying out of the visit was supported by many individuals and institutions, particularly including cooperation of CARE with the Federal Institute of Agricultural Economics, Rural and Mountain Research (BAB), frequent exchange and discussion with local actors of the visited area in Lesachtal to plan and decide on themes and initiatives to be shown, inclusion of experts on use and options for mountain products labelling, as well as integration of Austrian experts on influential policy programs and national views on mountain development support, particularly linked to practical issues of LEADER implementation, sustainable tourism strategy and use of mountains' resources. Organizational support by Simone Matouch (Competence Center on Cultural Sustainability, Lesachtal) in preparing and realizing the study visit is gratefully acknowledged.

## Workshop in Vienna

The workshop on the first day of the study visit (Monday, 30 May 2022, see agenda in trip package) aimed at providing a sound background to the field trip to the mountain region. After a series of welcome speeches by the involved institutions (CARE and ADA, BAB, EU-delegation, LAG Mestia, Mestia municipality) various themes of interest to local development in mountain regions were presented and discussed. In particular, this involved the following topics:

- Challenges of remoteness and marginalization of mountain areas, relevance in National Spatial Strategy considerations, presented by Paul Himmelbauer (Austrian Spatial Development Conference, ÖROK)
- Social innovation and sustainable regional strategies, presented by Henrike Hügelsberger (Austrian Research Promotion Agency, FFG)
- Enhancing youth participation and nature protection in mountain contexts, online presentation by Christina Thanner (International Commission for the Protection of the Alps, CIPRA) and Marc Stannartz (CIPRA Youth Council)
- LEADER implementation and practical experience in implementing mountain-specific local action groups, online presentation by Wolfgang Berger (Regional Development Agency, Eastern Styria, Kaindorf)
- Pasture development, nature and mountain tourism relations, presented by Markus Fischer (Austrian Chamber of Agriculture)
- Culinary product development in Austrian nature parks, presented by Maria Asamer-Handler (Natural Parks Austria)
- Mountain products, examples from European mountain regions, video contribution by Guillaume Corradino (Euromontana, Brussels)
- Mountain policy support in Austria, presented by Thomas Dax (BAB)

At the outset of the workshop the relevance of the study visit was addressed by all the representatives of the involved institutions in their introductory remarks, highlighting the stage of project implementation of LAG Mestia and the urge of participants to learn from European experiences of LEADER implementation and processes of local community development in mountain areas. The introductions underpinned the need to raise awareness for place-specific challenges and opportunities in mountain regions, aspects of multi-level governance, coordination and cooperation issues, and institutional processes as prerequisite to effective local community development frameworks.

Themes presented to participants were intensively discussed and comparative views of spatial and organizational conditions between the different contexts were assessed. The first three presentations aimed at setting the scene for an enhanced understanding of the Austrian spatial development context, pointing to the high share of mountain areas within this country and the relevance for national spatial strategy concepts. The intensive coordination of Austria's institutions through horizontal and vertical cooperation by the Austrian Spatial Development Conference (ÖROK) provides on-going support and a



sound basis for mountain priority and societal and political consensus on *spatial development* orientation. This perspective exceeds economic support and includes aspects of *social innovation* as crucial foundations for enhancing regional development. Such a view is particularly important for orientations towards sustainable mountain development action. These considerations are not restricted to Austria, but as CIPRA and the long-term activities of the Alpine Convention reveal *nature protection* aspects and strategies to preserve the ecological benefits of the Alps as valuable assets for inhabitants and incoming tourists are matters of trans-national coordination. As the presentation by CIPRA underscored this is not a backward approach to just secure high-quality status of ecological performance but views, ambition and future plans of young people need to be listened and taken up seriously in respective regional development concepts.

The following three presentations focused on how programs and local action enhances and makes use of mountain-specific opportunities. The first was the report of *LEADER implementation* in Austria and practical experiences drawn from the long involvement of many Austrian LAGs in this local development scheme. Summarizing the discussions of the national LEADER-forum Austria the history of LEADER application and the on-going need for strengthening this local program in Austrian rural, and particularly mountain regions, was emphasized. Cultural heritage, social dimensions and openness for creativity were shown as key components for fruitful local initiatives. In a mountain context, the role of *pasture areas* with regard to landscape effects and shaping attractiveness of areas for tourism purposes is a crucial aspect for large parts of regions in Austria. Additionally, *nature parks* are a further option for harnessing the wide scope of nature-related development opportunities of these spaces, including not only tourism activities but importantly also a wide set of culinary products development.

Finally, the option for mountain-specific labels, as a means to enhance geographical indication of agricultural production, was explained and several European examples of diverse application strategies by France, Romania and Spain were referred to. This video input by Euromontana was included implementation of this labelling option is not well advanced in Austria, but other geographical indications are relevant here (as we could see at the end of the study visit to the region). Similarly, there is no mountain law or dedicated “mountain policy” in Austria, but numerous orientations in relevant policy areas towards mountain support. These concur to common spatial effects, and regions like our study visit area of Lesachtal have made use of policy and local strategies in an integrated view on development needs and options. It is the combined effect of local initiatives and practical use of policy incentives through local and regional actors which best show achievements and outcomes of mountain development in Austrian regions.

## Study tour to Lesachtal, Carinthia, AT

The selection of Lesachtal as destination for the study visit was inspired by the long-term commitment of the municipality and local actors with local mountain development and a strategy towards sustainable and resilient tourism pathways<sup>1</sup>. The long distance from Vienna (more than 400 km) should not be the main obstacle to learn from the specific experiences. Preparations were gratefully endorsed by local partners and an intensive visiting programme was achieved. The visiting points should cover the range of diverse projects and development activities of the small municipality and highlight the scope of potential orientations. However, as discussion meetings (in the evenings) clarified there are numerous other

<sup>1</sup> The municipality of Lesachtal is located in the South-West of the Carinthia, the most southern province of Austria. At the border to East Tyrol (in the west) and Italy (in the south) it stretches for about 20 km along the valley of the Gail river, comprising 30 small villages and hamlets with about 1,200 inhabitants. Settlement area and agricultural land use is concentrated in the valley at an altitude of about 1,000 to 1,400 meters. Due to its rugged terrain, characterized by the gorge of the river and steep slopes, the remote settlements are difficult to access and embrace typical conditions of high mountain farming and land management. The remoteness and reduced accessibility of the area helped to retain a high degree of pristine natural resources and biodiversity level, which led to promote Lesachtal as the most well-kept area of “untouched landscapes in the Alps”.



activities in the area which we could not visit during our study tour. In the following the various visiting points are listed, in order to report on the variance of activities of actors and main topics addressed:

- Visit to „Village shop“ (31 May 2022)  
On arrival in the area of Lesachtal the village shop in Birnbaum was visited. Having been closed due to limited volume of sales, this shop had been reopened through support of local inhabitants and public support. After reorientation of its offer and sales concept it provides services of daily demand for the locals as well as local handicraft products and regional specialties, and thus an emblematic impression on the range and types of regional products.
- Welcome by local actors  
On the first evening of the visit in the study area, the local authorities - the mayor, the manager of the local tourism agency and the contact person preparing the study visit - gave a warm welcome to the group at the hotel venue. They emphasized the local strategical commitment targeted since long at sustainable pathways, cooperative spirit and main items and themes to be experienced during the study visit.
- Focus on sustainable tourism concept (1 June 2022)  
The municipality is committed to a particular approach of sustainable tourism development since three decades. This tourism concept limiting tourism intensity in the area is enhanced by recent approaches of slow food and slow travel, sustained through agri-touristic activities, theme-specific walking trails and supplementary action of communicating philosophy of „slow tourism“ concepts.
- Cultural and natural heritage  
Another focus of project initiatives is the use of cultural and natural heritage. Visit to the main locality, Maria Luggau, enabled us to enjoy the architectural complex of the small village, attached to the historical convent, the monastery garden with a place-specific collection of plants and herbs of high diversity, the use of an ensemble of historical grain mills that are still in use and a local shop for selling handicraft and regional products, herbs and other tourism related offers. Visiting a young organic farmer showed that local traditional food is still valued and produced in a very attractive way.
- LEADER activities in Lesachtal and trans-regional cooperation  
In order to provide an overview on the implementation of LEADER in the area, a discussion round with the LEADER manager was organized in the evening. This enabled an intensive exchange of local development considerations, including issues of participation and spatial cooperation with neighbouring areas through a so-called „Valley Parliament“ and the crucial role of young people in rural development.
- Regional farm production and health aspects (2 June 2022)  
On the next day, the visit to another mountain farm focused on regional food production, related aspects of health and measures to secure quality of life. The combination of agricultural activities with diversification and farm-based services and thematic courses enriched the examples of linking farming, landscape, nature, health and cultural interlinkages.
- Agri-tourism activities in remote location  
The next enterprise was located in a very remote place, representing the highest located farm of the valley at 1,350m. The young couple operating the farm had diversified the activities and offer agri-touristic services using own cheese and other farming products.
- Traditional music and local museum  
A further visit point showed the „Folks Music Academy“ which deliberately enhances professional encounters between musicians, musical educators and classical music. Based on a concept of integrating theoretical and practical considerations, a thorough exchange of tradition and innovation, and different cultural expression forms is enhanced. In particular, the visit to the attached museum of a zealous violin maker revealed the dedication and spirit of local people.





- Climate and energy adaptation  
Another evening discussion round highlighted the engagement of the area in adapting towards the demands of climate change. The activities of the Lesachtal as a dedicated 'climate and energy model region' in Carinthia were rewarded for its engagement to foster the topic even during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the area was labelled as the most climate-friendly tourism region of Austria.
- Geographical indication of Alpine pastures cheese product (3 June 2022)  
Our last visit showed us the example of a mountain specific geographical indication of Alpine pastures cheese production (Gailtaler Almkäse g.U.), a PDO product (Protected Designation of Origin) following traditional and region-specific recipes and production methods. Nowadays, this cheese production is limited to just 13 pastures, situated on the border to Italy high up in the mountains of Gailtal, Carinthia.

## Lessons learned

The study visit was carried out at a time when two calls for projects had already been organized by LAG Mestia. This background had allowed a continuous discussion of local development consideration and LEADER implementation in the Georgian context, and induced a basic awareness of local action processes and familiarity with realizing LEADER projects in a mountain context. Participants thus arrived with a lot of ideas, specific perspectives, questions and expectations to this study visit.

The intention was to expose Georgian local actors with the characteristic context of high mountain region in Austria, set in a remote surrounding that is not determined by intensive tourism flows, but by features of sustainable tourism concepts. The main consideration was that obstacles and pathways experienced by such a region would be more interesting than those of tourism hot spots in Western Austria. Moreover, the case of Lesachtal is iconic for a remote location and a long-term commitment to participative approaches and self-restrictions on tourism growth.

It was one of the main experiences, expressed by participants at the end of the study visit, that the balancing activities of human action with natural processes have been realized as a core guiding principle of local actors. This applies to farm managers, project operators, cultural activists and local community actors, and particularly to the way how they argue about development aspects and local options and decisions.

Many local activities are based on long-term socio-cultural processes that demand a deep awareness of place-specific contextual conditions and sufficient time for establishing adapted actions. It is no surprise that innovative and sensitive concepts like slow food, slow travel etc. find a fertile ground in this area. The specific aspects enhanced by this approach is quality-orientation, reflected use of resources, local origin and emphasis on flavour. Thereby, it intends to overcome deficiencies of short-term exclusionary productivity concerns. It chimes with LEADER guiding principles that foster local specificity, acknowledgment of local assets, innovation and creativity, as well as cooperative spirit to realize interesting new activities.

This approach has limits and cannot be realized as a "mainstream" concept of cost-efficient production. In contrast, it focuses on nurturing local specificities and limiting the offer to levels that are compatible with local (and regional) size and scope. The recognition of limits of development seems core and has to be approved by local actors. On the other hand, a certain pride and consciousness of quality of production and services has to be developed.

Initiatives are either directly linked to cultural traits or are indirectly based on socio-cultural foundations. Numerous examples in the region deploy the cultural heritage which is used as a development facilitator, but particularly also as a combining element of local population's common views and perceptions. Nurturing cultural expressions and considerations to elaborate on these and refine local and external



uptake are inspiring activities. Even if these are not linked to current projects or product initiatives, these are invaluable resources of local experience.

Lessons might also be seen in the scope of diversification activities of farm households visited. The linkages of activities might indicate the wide range of potential and point to the creative power of local actors, including the capacity and interest of young people. It seems particularly important to enhance the young generation in their aspirations of finding an appropriate position and place for their views and activities.

A last issue, but maybe this is a crucial one, is the experience that this remote area abounds of ideas to cope with adverse socio-economic contexts, seemingly insurmountable difficulties and harsh environmental conditions. Despite all these unfavourable aspects, place-sensitive responses could be explored and solutions of high interest were presented. These are based on long-term commitment, endurance of many involved people and transfer to next generations.

## Follow-up

The study visit, of course, gained from practical examples and left deep impressions with many participants, but also with involved local actors. Conceived as an exchange of views and experiences, it is valuable that local actors also re-consider their approaches and aim to understand concerns and views of guests. It is hoped that exchange of cultural expressions might have an impact on considering also socio-economic concepts and understanding of drivers and obstacles of local development.

Follow up activities for the LAG Mestia might involve a targeted discussion of lessons learned by participants, and variance of impressions. These views should be reflected, collected and addressed in small local discussion rounds aimed at further development processes. While some activities might be linked directly to LEADER program activities, others might go beyond and would have to be advanced by various local actors.

As a group of young people of LAG Mestia participated in the study visit their impressions and conclusions would be an important separate outcome. It will be relevant to provide space and time for those participants to gather their specific ideas, and seek guidance for strengthening those messages and finding implementation options.

Moreover, experiences of visiting a mountain LAG in Austria could be shared in the future activities on elaborating a network on mountain LAGs in Georgia. BAB is committed to support this process and initiate relevant action in the remaining project period.

## Documents attached

Annex 1: Trip package (version EN/DE; respectively, version GEO)

Annex 2: Participant list

Annex 3-10: Presentations at workshop in Vienna (30/05/2022)

Annex 11: Document LEADER Forum Austria: Strengthening LEADER and the rural areas

Annex 12-13: Papers: Dax and Oedl-Wieser 2016, Dax 2001